

Deaths By Suicide Remain a Major Public Health Issue in Guyana – Lawmakers Can Do More To End This Tragedy And Save Lives

June 2018
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GEORGETOWN, GY - Deaths by suicide in Guyana remain among the highest in the world, despite progress in recent years. In 2018, 31 of every 100,000 persons died by suicide, according to data by the [World Atlas](#). This puts Guyana second for the highest suicide death rate in the world, behind only Sri Lanka. This corresponds to roughly one suicide death every day and a half. While the overall suicide death rate has declined since 2012, the problem is far from over. Accordingly, lawmakers should equip public health agencies and professionals with the necessary resources to address this tragedy.

Suicide is the act of ending one's life voluntarily and intentionally. Suicide is considered both a social and public health issue because it costs lives, weakens families, and negatively impacts economic growth. Many mental health conditions associated with suicide are treatable, according to the Pan-American Health Organization. While suicide is not endemic to any particular group of people, in Guyana it is more prevalent among the Indian population. If you are an Indian male between the ages of 20 and 49, you are more likely to commit suicide than anyone else.

EVIDENCE SHOWS:

- ❑ Males kill themselves at three times the rate of females in Guyana.
- ❑ For every suicide in Guyana there are approximately 20 to 25 attempted suicides.
- ❑ The suicide rate is highest among ethnic Indian males, 20–49 years old.
- ❑ Most suicides in Guyana are committed by consumption of agricultural pesticides.

WHAT ABOUT THE SURVIVORS?

Suicide can be a devastating experience for those left behind. Individual survivors are at risk for complicated grief reactions, mental disorders, and even future suicides. Focusing on the aftermath of suicide within families is an important next step to determine exactly how to help survivors.

Julie Cerel, John R. Jordan, et al (2008)

WHY ARE PEOPLE COMMITTING SUICIDE?

Suicide is not heavily studied in Guyana so little is known about its underlying causes, early warning signs, and relationships to other social issues. Research suggests that suicide is linked to factors like mental and physical health and social and economic well-being. In the case of Guyana, deep rural poverty, alcohol abuse, lack of access to mental health services, and easy access to deadly pesticides are associated with suicide deaths, according to the World Health Organization.

Since 2012, the issue of suicide received some attention from lawmakers who sought to raise awareness through public campaigns and other initiatives. The government, for example, tried to provide farmers with storage cabinets to keep deadly pesticides safe, and more recently the police force established a suicide prevention hotline. These well-intended efforts, however, were insufficient as many Guyanese remain unaware of them. Further, given that attempted suicide is a crime in Guyana, it is unlikely that persons contemplating suicide would seek help from a service managed by the police force.

In 2014, the government adopted a [National Mental Health/Suicide Prevention Plan for 2015-2020](#). The goal of the plan was to reduce the incidence of suicide and attempted suicide by 20 percent by 2020. The plan included several measures to reduce suicide deaths, the majority of which revolved around public education and developing effective communication strategies. The plan also outlined actions to reduce the number of suicides resulting from self-poisonings, including measures to limit access to toxic substances and to enforce regulations on the sale of deadly pesticides. While some argue this could force potential victims to find alternative means of committing suicide, a recent [study](#) found that pesticide suicide mortality in South Korea halved after paraquat – a deadly pesticide often used in suicides – was banned. It also found no discernable impact on crop yields.

POLICIES TO REDUCE SUICIDE DEATHS

But limiting access to deadly pesticides alone would not be enough. What people need – particularly those suffering from mental health issues – is access to quality and affordable mental health services. This requires investments in public hospitals and community health centers to deliver these services. Similarly, persons affected by addiction, domestic violence, and neglect require quality social support services to help them overcome these issues and lead successful lives. More broadly, policies and programs that seek to fight poverty, reduce youth unemployment, create good paying jobs, and grow the economy are critical in addressing the social and economic dimensions of suicide. When the economy is growing and creating wealth that is reaching households, the prospects of escaping poverty, finding a good paying job, and achieving economic success improves, which inspires hope and confidence about the future.

Regardless of how you look at the issue, we can all agree that a life lost to suicide negatively affects our society and economy. Suicide destroys families, adds mental and

emotional strains to other family members and society, discourages local tourism and private investments, and limits future national income and economic growth. Clearly too much is at stake to continue with business as usual. Lawmakers need to move beyond rhetoric and the adoption of plans and take bold actions to end this tragedy.

KNOW THE FACTS

- Most suicides are preventable;
- Building individual and community resiliency helps prevent suicide (e.g. enhancing coping skills and community and familial supports that increase sense of belonging);
- Providing easy access to mental health and social support services to struggling individuals helps prevent suicide by resolving underlying issues and build hope;
- Approximately 80% of people who kill themselves signal their suicidal intentions to others;
- Reducing stigma and talking openly about suicide are key to preventing suicide.

ABOUT GBPI

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